

Relative to much of the country, Nebraska and other Great Plains states have fared well during the economic recession. Our state, behind only North and South Dakota, has the third lowest unemployment rate in the country, and we consistently rank among the top states in terms of financial health and business climate. Our strong agricultural economy is a primary factor. One of my top priorities in Congress is working to ensure that agricultural opportunity is a reliable and stabilizing influence in rural America for years to come.

Nebraskans are rooted in the land, culturally and economically. The family farm, where the values of personal responsibility, family, and hard work are enculturated in daily living, has shaped the nature and character of our society and formed our attitudes toward responsible finance, governance, and civic engagement.

Agriculture remains critical to our economy today. One in three Nebraskans have jobs that are agriculture-related. Despite weathering a drier climate than their farming neighbors to the East, Nebraska farmers have turned the Cornhusker state into one of the top agricultural producing states in America. We are fourth in total agricultural receipts, third in corn production, fifth in soybeans, second in cattle and calves, and third in all livestock production. We are also the second largest producer of ethanol, and first in the nation in the amount of irrigated land.

As agriculture continues to play an essential role in the lives of many in the Heartland, it is increasingly important that farm policy is sound, fair, and welcoming of new opportunities that promote success in rural America. The Agriculture Committee has started the process of public hearings on the next Farm Bill. At the end of this month, the Committee will have held eight field hearings, starting April 31 in Des Moines and ending May 18 in Sioux Falls. I have been pleased to participate in some of these important discussions, as they pertain to the diverse and changing nature of American agriculture.

As a member of the House Agriculture Committee, I was involved in crafting the last Farm Bill – adopted in 2008. Although that bill wasn't perfect, and fell short in reforming the farm payment system, it generally helped strengthen ag entrepreneurship opportunities, including the promotion of local and regional food systems and ag-based renewable energy. I was pleased to offer successful amendments that allow school districts to more easily purchase locally raised foods and help rural communities become energy self-sufficient through ag-based renewable energy systems.

The next Farm Bill comes with new challenges. The average age of the American farmer is now 58 years old. We must prepare for a widespread generational shift in land and resources. Farm payments are lopsided to the largest farms. A recent study shows the top 10 percent of farm payment recipients collected 62 percent of all payments. This can lead to the escalation of land prices and accelerate the concentration of land and resources into fewer and fewer hands, which is not healthy for rural America.

Despite challenges, there are also great opportunities. Agriculture is one of the few areas in which America still maintains a trade surplus. We export a great deal of food, and as the world

population grows so will demand in expanding foreign markets, such as southeast Asia and South America. At home, innovative producers are tapping into rapidly emerging specialty markets, including natural, organic, and locally raised foods. Regional food systems help increase access to fresh, nutritious foods and build local economies. A recent Iowa State study of six Midwestern states found that growing produce to meet local demand would mean more than \$1 billion in economic impact and 9,300 new jobs.

The Heartland has remained stable and relatively healthy during a significant national economic downturn, due largely to agriculture's influence. Middle America is well positioned to lead our economic recovery, with specialized opportunities in food and energy production. The future is bright in rural America, if we believe in our potential and capture our opportunities. I am excited to help craft good farm policies that will shape agricultural opportunity for coming generations of American farmers.